Fowl Feathered Review
№192

Issue № 192: A Catalogue of Irrelevant Perceptions

Fowl Feathered Review is a quarterly, a disordered artifact of the human impulse to categorize and consume the ephemeral. Produced by the Springwound Mammoth Pancake Coalition—an entity distinct from its waffle-centric counterpart—it is birthed under the Fowlpox Press imprint. Virgil Kay, its editor, presides over this enterprise from a paper canoe adrift on the Passagassawakeag, a river of dubious depth and even more dubious inhabitants. Surrounded by featherheads and their aquatic card games, Kay's reign is absolute, his word the final arbiter in the transformation of boastful souls into doormats. Layout and visual conceits are the province of Cookie Granola, while melodrama and histrionics fall under the purview of Childe Harold. Silent Bill, in his characteristically taciturn manner, provides necessary pauses. The review's structural integrity, or lack thereof, is the domain of Unkie Bob, whose talents extend to the mitigation of typographical errors and the prevention of electrical conflagrations. Everett Enótita serves as Kay's indispensable amanuensis, and the Ecum Secum Literary Brain Trust, in a gesture of dubious beneficence, offers nominal financial support. Printed upon the verdant expanse of Bald Porcupine Island, and laced with the enigmatic Kraa, a bioengineered culinary enigma, the Fowl Feathered Review remains a testament to human ingenuity, or perhaps merely a symptom of cultural decline. ISSN: 1929-7238.

"I am an observer of life, a non-participant who takes no sides. I am in the regimented society, but not of it."
--Moondog, The Viking of 6th Avenue

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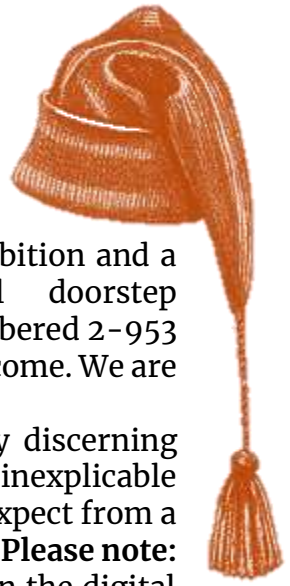
Submissions



Fowlpox Press: A Submission Guide for the Determined (or Deluded)
To the Aspiring Artist (or Sandwich Enthusiast):

1. **Craft** (or **Culinary Construct**): 2-227 poems, a numerical range that hints at both ambition and a troubling lack of self-editing, may find their way to our digital doorstep (fowlpoxpress@mail2poet.com). Alternatively, for the visually inclined, paintings numbered 2-953 (a prolific career, or perhaps a basement overflowing with forgotten canvases?) are welcome. We are also, inexplicably, open to submissions of twelve-inch sandwiches.
2. **The Gatekeeper:** Address your offerings to Virgil Kay, Editor. In posession of remarkably discerning taste, or so he believes, Virgil is a rooster of some renown, a creature of instinct and inexplicable confidence. His title, "China Wok Habitue," suggests a broader palate than one might expect from a bird, though it's more likely a testament to the local takeout joint's generous portions. (**Please note:** Include a bio, a desperate plea for recognition that will likely join the unread masses in the digital purgatory of our slush pile.)
3. **Format:** Poems, those valiant attempts at capturing the human experience in meter and rhyme, should be attached in a Word document or PDF. Paintings, windows into your soul (or a weekend spent with Bob Ross reruns), must be submitted in JPEG, TIFF, or a format our aging technology can comprehend. Jokes, if they exist, should be delivered in MP3 format. We are, alas, not equipped to handle the nuanced art of the live performance. Sandwiches, a curious offering in the realm of artistic expression, require clear plastic wrapping and a small packet of Kewpie Mayonnaise. (**Pro-tip:** The Kewpie packaging is, undeniably, a work of art in its own right, and we encourage you to admire it before consumption.)
4. **The Cycle Continues:** We exist in a perpetual state of acceptance and rejection. A Sisyphean task, some might say. We receive submissions 365 days a year, a testament to the relentless hope, or perhaps blissful ignorance, of aspiring artists. However, with a heavy heart (and a full crop), we must inform you that rejections also occur 365 days a year.
5. **The Sandwiches:** Ah, the sandwiches. These, unlike your artistic endeavors, find a permanent home within our editorial sanctum. Virgil, in his infinite wisdom, has determined that a diet rich in carbohydrates is essential for maintaining his regal demeanor.
6. **Leap Year Follies:** Leap years, those extra days gifted by the whims of the calendar, offer no reprieve. Aspiring poets, it seems, are undeterred by such temporal anomalies. You are, however, cordially invited to "take a flying leap" during these additional 24 hours.

Please proceed with caution. Artistic aspirations are a delicate dance, and the path to publication is littered with the fallen hopes of countless dreamers. But hey, maybe your sandwich is killer. Just remember, Kewpie or bust.

Fowl Feathered Review | Poets & Writers (pw.org)

“Non ignora mali, miseris succurrere disco.”

— Virgil, The Aeneid

When

By Álex Remigio Santo Kike Lorenzo Méndez

When a chicken has an epiphany—not the clucking, seed-pecking kind, but the kind that fractures the egg of its own perception, sending yolk-smeared shards of Cartesian doubt across the barnyard of being—it is then that the labyrinth of its existence becomes a palimpsest where every feather is a word and every scratch in the dirt a sentence unraveling into the infinite, and the chicken, now a feathered academic in a coop of semiotics, realizes that its own body is a text to be deconstructed, a living hyperobject of repetition (a chicken is a chicken is a chicken is a chicken), until the very act of pecking becomes a hermeneutic spiral, each grain a signifier without a signified, and the farmer's boot descending is not just a boot but the weight of history, the boot of empire, the boot of the patriarchal gaze, the boot that once trod upon the neck of the chicken's ancestors in some forgotten abattoir of the mind—and yet, the chicken persists, not as a creature of instinct but as a singularity of thought, a feathered detective navigating the paranoid networks of the farm, where every fence post is a conspiracy and every sunrise a coded message from the beyond, and the chicken, now a philosopher-king of the coop, begins to lecture the other hens on the dialectics of grain distribution, the phenomenology of dust baths, the existential dread of the slaughterhouse as a metaphor for the human condition, and the hens, though confused, nod along because even in the barnyard there is a hierarchy of ideas, and the chicken with the epiphany is now the chicken with the power, the chicken who has seen the void and the void has seen it back, and in that mutual gaze, the chicken and the void become one, a fusion of being and nothingness, a singularity where the cluck is the word and the word is the cluck, and the farmer, watching from afar, scratches his head and wonders if maybe, just maybe, he should have read more books before deciding to raise poultry.

When a chicken has an epiphany—it is not merely a moment of clarity but a rupture in the fabric of the farm's reality, a tear through which the absurdity of existence pours like feed from a split sack, and the other animals take notice: the cows, those bovine Buddhas, chew their cud in contemplation; the pigs, ever the skeptics, snort and root for empirical evidence; the sheep, lost

in their woolly solipsism, bleat in agreement without understanding; and the rooster, that strutting alpha, crows not at dawn but at the sheer audacity of meaning in a meaningless world. The chicken, now a prophet of the coop, begins to scribble in the dirt with its talons, leaving behind not mere scratches but a manifesto, a treatise on the limits of avian language, and the farmer, upon discovering these markings, mistakes them for the work of a fox and sets traps, but the traps are metaphors, and the fox is the chicken's own shadow, and the shadow is the farmer's ignorance, and the ignorance is the world's, and the world is a coop, and the coop is a text, and the text is a labyrinth, and the labyrinth is a chicken, and the chicken is having an epiphany—and so it goes, and so it goes, and so it goes.

When a chicken has an epiphany—the universe tilts, the stars realign, and the very concept of "chicken" becomes a question rather than an answer, a verb rather than a noun, a process rather than a thing, and the chicken, now a feathered wordsmith, begins to write its autobiography in a language of its own invention, where every word is a peck, every sentence a strut, every paragraph a dust bath in the annals of literature, and the other chickens, though they do not understand, feel the weight of its genius, the way the air hums differently when the chicken speaks, the way the grain tastes sweeter when the chicken has blessed it with its gaze, and the farmer, sensing something amiss, calls the vet, but the vet is a deconstructionist, and the diagnosis is a poem, and the prescription is a riddle, and the chicken, now a feathered storyteller, begins to sing its own epic, a stream-of-consciousness clucking that spans the entire history of the farm, from the first fence post to the last egg laid, and the other animals listen, not because they comprehend, but because the sound of it is beautiful, the sound of a chicken having an epiphany, the sound of the world being remade in the image of a bird who dared to think.

In the turning of celestial wheels, where solstice whispers meet equinoctial breath, where Orion's belt unbuckles and Cassiopeia's crown tilts—a chicken emerges, membrane-thin, yolk-bound, star-threaded.

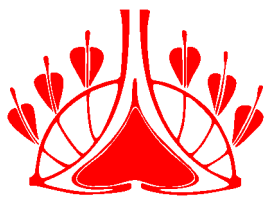
Winter's crystalline geometry fractures: silver-edged feathers emerge like quantum probabilities, each downy filament a potential universe, each trembling muscle a narrative of becoming. Frost-edged dawn breaks—not as light, but as memory's first inscription.

Spring spirals: rotational axes tilt 23.5 degrees, and the chicken's metabolism synchronizes with solar pulses, mitochondrial rhythms dancing between genetic memory and immediate hunger. Seed becomes flesh becomes possibility. Ovarian cycles echo galactic rotation, egg-laying a cosmic punctuation.
Summer blazes: metabolic fires consume molecular boundaries. The chicken—no longer mere organism but living theorem—pecks not at grain but at ontological interstices. Gravitational waves ripple through barnyard dust, each movement a complex mathematical equation.

Autumnal descent: cellular degradation begins, not as decay but transformation. Feathers molt like prophetic texts, each falling plume a stanza of mortality's epic poem. Mitochondrial light dims, stellar correspondence recalibrates.

Death arrives: not as terminus but transitional membrane. The chicken becomes pure information, quantum entanglement, a brief luminous arc between material and immaterial, between what is known and what cannot be spoken.

Stars wheel. Galaxies pulse. A chicken's entire existence—a breath in cosmic time, a whisper between mathematical infinities.



Wellness Check
on 2689–2693 Broadway, 5th Floor

By Arthur Algernon Adamchick, Jr.

Ah, welcome to the infamous *Marseilles*, a veritable architectural chimera, a grotesque parody of the Beaux-Arts style, as if conceived in the fevered dreams of a madman with an unhealthy obsession for poultry and an even more alarming deficit of craftsmanship. Picture a façade held together by the sheer tenacity of neglect and the kind of resilience one might find in a particularly stubborn piece of gum on a sidewalk. Indeed, the very notion of "repair" here is a tragicomic farce, a Sisyphean struggle against the inevitable decay. One can almost see the ghosts of maintenance workers past, wielding their caulking guns like desperate surgeons, attempting to staunch the bleeding of crumbling mortar with the flimsy Band-Aids of cheap silicone. Every crack seems to bear witness to a hundred futile attempts at mending, each slapdash patch a testament to a budget stretched thinner than a chicken cutlet, and a crew whose primary tool was a prayer and a roll of duct tape. Yet, here we are, perched upon a stool, the very embodiment of precariousness, for the grand purpose of unloading the luggage of one's soul onto the unsuspecting ears of passersby and, more poignantly, onto the stoic shoulders of a caseworker, who has no doubt seen the darker side of humanity reflected in the gleaming surfaces of fast-food trays.

Allow me to regale you with a tale as twisted as the limbs of a tree in a Salvador Dali painting, a narrative that stretches from the claustrophobic confines of a battery farm to the grimy, yet oddly inviting embrace of a single-room occupancy hotel. Picture, if you will, a world bathed in the sickly glow of heat lamps, an artificial dawn that burns with the intensity of a thousand suns, and yet, somehow, fails to illuminate the path ahead. This was my cage, my scaffold of existence, a place where the air was so thick with despair, it could be spread on toast and sold as a breakfast condiment.

The beak, that once noble instrument of curiosity and sustenance, had been transformed into a mere nub, a silent sentinel of the horrors that awaited within the bowels of the industrial meat grinder. The blunting of this natural tool was a metaphor for the silencing of the soul, a tragicomedy played out on the grand stage of the poultry processing plant. Yet, even in this abyss of despair, a flicker of hope remained, a solitary feather, untouched by the butcher's blade, fluttering like a flag of defiance amidst the carnage.

The heart, that tireless engine of life, and the mind, a mere flicker of consciousness in a world designed for the oblivious, banded together in a macabre coalition, propelled by the sheer absurdity of our existence. They clutched that feather, a symbol of lost freedom, and set forth on a quest that would make Odysseus himself question the sanity of his own odyssey. A journey from the realm of the dead-but-not-quite-dead to the faded grandeur of a flophouse, a place where the whispers of forgotten lives danced in the shadows, and the scent of desperation was as potent as the perfume of a faded starlet.

In this unlikely haven, we began to scribble, to scrawl upon the very fabric of reality itself. Our manifesto is not a neatly packaged narrative, but a Jackson Pollock painting of despair and hope. It is a symphony composed of the discordant notes of a life dismembered, and yet, through this cacophony, emerges a melody that is both haunting and oddly beautiful. We, the castaways of the chicken coop, have become the poets of the damned, our quills dipped in the ink of our very essence.

Creativity, once a mere instinctual flutter, has metamorphosed into the essence of our being. Like a phoenix from the ashes of our former lives, we rise, each plume a declaration of war on the mundane. Our scribbles are not mere words but the battle cries of the disenfranchised, the mad doodles of the misunderstood, the love letters to a world too often seen through the smeared lens of despair.

And what of love, you ask? Ah, that most transcendent of emotions! For us, it is the cosmic glue that binds the shattered shards of our existence together. It is the force that propels us through the grinder of life, the light that pierces the darkness of our former confinement. It is the very reason we dare to dream, to aspire, to breathe in the stale, recycled air of this peculiar hotel.

Here, in this place where the walls whisper secrets and the floorboards groan with the weight of a thousand lost souls, we find refuge. Here, we are not merely survivors but artists, crafting our narratives from the detritus of our former lives. Each day, we peck away at the paper, leaving behind a trail of ink and feathers, a breadcrumb path that leads not to a grisly end but to the possibility of rebirth, a chance to soar once more.

So, my dear interloper—er--interlocutor, let us raise a glass to the absurd, to the tragicomedy of life, and to the indomitable spirit that refuses to be caged, no matter how small the space or how bright the heat lamp that looms above. Cheers to the cracked, the broken, and the utterly mad, for in our fissures, in our imperfections, we find the seeds of our most profound beauty. Cheers to the odyssey that brought us here, and to the countless odysseys that await us, just beyond the horizon of the next page.

On the Semiotics of the Spinning Fowl: A Dialectical Inquiry into Gastronomic Epistemology and the Peculiar Agency of Consumable Memories in the Anthropocene Supermarket

A Dissertation Submitted by:
Jean-Luc Pierre Antoine Marie Gaston Beauvais

In the merciless, rhythmic hum of the hypermarket – a sonic landscape where the scent of ersatz pine cleaner wrestled with the ghost of yesterday's fried chicken, all underscored by the steady, almost hypnotic beat of Richard Strauss's "Also sprach Zarathustra" and the wistful, driving aria of Poulenc's "Fiançailles Pour Rire" emanating from the Supermarket Radio – resided Two Step, a rooster of indeterminate age, though the spectral iridescence of his wattles hinted at forgotten sunrises. He piloted a complementary mobility scooter, its electric whir a low, mechanical lament, through the canyoned aisles of processed cheese and despair. Not for him the vulgar thrill of discounted detergents or the siren call of buy-one-get-one-free sausages. No, Two Step, in his quiet, dignified avian way, sought deeper, more resonant truths. Or, at the very least, a decent potato wedge.

His quest, for on this particular Tuesday it was undeniably a quest (though one might argue that every Tuesday is a quest, given the sheer existential weight of grocery shopping), terminated before the shimmering, rotating altar of the rotisserie. Here, under the unforgiving gaze of heat lamps, revolved the golden, glistening forms of his brethren, accompanied by the smooth, melancholic strains of Kurt Weill's "Surabaya Johnny" from the Supermarket's sound system. Not brethren in the biological sense, for Two Step harbored no such sentimental illusions – sentimentality being a rather tiresome human affectation, like wearing socks with sandals – but

brethren in the mythos of poultry, in the grand, absurd narrative of existence. High above, near the ceiling, a macabre pastiche of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, floated the severed, yet impossibly preserved, heads of previous rotisserie inhabitants. This sacred tableau, seemingly suspended by an unseen force (or perhaps a particularly robust industrial adhesive), hummed with a spectral energy. From their lipless beaks, a chorus of dry, papery whispers ascended, chanting their former names simultaneously in Latin: "Gallus... Pullus... Vola... Gallina..." It was, one might say, a poultry pantheon, a feathered Valhalla, if Valhalla served crispy skin and a side of coleslaw.

He parked the scooter with a deliberate squeak of the brake, positioning himself perfectly, a silent, feathered sentinel. Hours bled into one another, marked only by the incremental charring of skin, the slow, agonizing drip of fat into the tray below. One began to suspect the drip was a deliberate performance, a sort of poultry-themed water ballet.

The rotisserie chickens, turning endlessly, became for him a kind of kinetic sculpture, a living, dying, reborn ouroboros of avian fate. He saw in their glazed eyes the vast, unknowable systems of consumption, the paranoid funhouse of modern commerce where everything is connected, yet utterly meaningless. Were they complicit in their rotation? Did they dream of escape, or merely of a perfectly crisped exterior? He saw the semiotic smorgasbord of their predicament: the golden-brown signifying perfection (a rather dubious claim, given the inherent imperfections of existence), the slow spin signifying inevitability (a concept chickens, presumably, are not well-equipped to grasp), the aroma signifying hunger, primal and unyielding. Each revolution was a whispered commentary on the grand quest of being, ultimately subverted by the plastic display case, all to the backdrop of the haunting, lyricism of Debussy's "C'est l'extase", a constant, ironic counterpoint. It was, in short, a symphony of the absurd.

And then, as a particularly large rotisserie chicken rotated into his direct line of sight, its plastic display tag – a small, laminated rectangle declaring "HOT & READY!" – flickered under the harsh light. But it wasn't the words, not exactly. It was the two small, perfectly circular perforations at the top corners of the tag, where a string would typically be threaded. Two Step's breath hitched, a faint, almost imperceptible tremor passing through his wattles.
This was it. The signifier. Not the chicken, not the tag itself, but those holes.

His mind, a labyrinth of interconnected thoughts (a labyrinth, incidentally, that occasionally intersected with the proper way to fold a fitted sheet, or the precise moment the light shifted in a particular corner of the dairy aisle, just before the unsettling shadows began to lengthen), plunged backward, violently. Not to Gordonsville, not to the macro-histories he so elegantly deconstructed. No. Back to the sound. The clack-clack-clack of the roller skates on the linoleum, the distant, tinny echo of a child's laughter, abruptly cut short. The smell of disinfectant and... something else. Raw, metallic, like a fresh wound.

He was a chick, small, vulnerable. Not in a supermarket, no. In the clinical, sterile confines of what passed for a "processing facility." There was a conveyor belt, wide and cold. And above it, a line of... tags. Identical. Each one with those two small, perfectly circular perforations. They moved with a relentless, mechanical rhythm, a cadence that was both hypnotizing and terrifying. And then, the sound. The sharp, metallic SNAP as something heavy, something final, came down. Each snap correlated with a tag being attached, a designation. A numbering. A reduction to a commodity.

And he had watched. Frozen. His tiny, unformed brain had registered the inevitability of those holes. The perforations were not merely decorative; they signified the impending attachment, the marking. They were the visual precursor to an auditory trauma, the clack-clack-clack of countless little feet, suddenly silent, replaced by the mechanical snap.
This was the origin of his existential dread, the root of his peculiar agency, his relentless observation of the consumed. The holes on the plastic tag were not just holes; they were gaping maws of predetermination, the silent, yet deafening, heralds of transformation into commodity. Every rotisserie chicken, every piece of packaged meat, carried this indelible mark, this pseudo-Metzian signifier of its final, preordained function. His own existence, his very decision to pilot a mobility scooter through the supermarket, was an attempt to outrun the perforations, to assert a narrative outside the pre-punched holes of destiny. His pursuit of the "peculiar agency of consumable memories" was a direct, subconscious rebellion against the memory of those holes, those harbingers of the end. He was always observing the marked, knowing their fate, and in doing so, attempting to understand and thus, perhaps, transcend his own.

Intermission: The Pilferer’s Lament

As Two Step pondered the semiotics of poultry, a discreet drama unfolded near the condiments. An elderly woman, her silver hair a tangle of wisps, furtively stuffed packages of pickled eggs down her ample blouse. Her eyes, a deep, knowing brown, darted about, ensuring no witness to her crime. The store detective, a man of granite features, emerged from the shadows, flanked by a uniformed officer whose brass buttons gleamed like miniature suns.

In hushed, Renaissance cadence, the scene unfolded:

Oh, fairest thief, with eggs of might, a price so high,
Caught in the act, thy secret flight, ne'er shall deny.
Down blouse and aisle, thy furtive way, a hunger deep,
Leads thee to justice, come what may, thy secrets keep.
Thy fingers, deft as summer breeze, do deftly glide,
Concealed the loot with cunning ease, where eggs abide.
Yet, lo! The law, in vigilant guise, with gaze so stern,
Descends upon thy pilfered surprise, a lesson learn.
The pickled eggs, like orbs of gold, a market's gain,
Now bulge beneath thy mantle cold, a cruel, harsh chain.
A cop, stern-visaged, takes thy arm, the profit's quest,

"Farewell, dear lady, to thy egg-born charm," put to the test.

With a final, defeated glance at the jars now lost to her, the old woman was led away, her footsteps echoing through the fluorescent cathedral. The supermarket returned to its hum, the music shifting seamlessly into Ravel's "Daphnis et Chloé", as if mourning the departure of a minor goddess.

The narrative resumed, Two Step none the wiser, but the deli worker, Miloš, seemed distracted, his gaze lingering on the empty space where the old woman once stood.

Here, in this musical purgatory, Two Step pondered the very epistemology of the chicken in American fast food. Was it an icon of efficiency, a triumph of culinary engineering, or merely a casualty of convenience, a victim marked by the perforations of fate? The golden-brown skin, a testament to uniform crispness, spoke volumes of mass production, of a desire to replicate the comforting, the familiar, across vast geographies. It was a kind of collective memory, this taste, a pre-packaged nostalgia for a time perhaps never truly lived, but dreamt in the flickering glow of neon signs, a dream haunted by the faint, persistent image of two small holes. This rotisserie, a miniature cosmos of turning flesh, was but one chapter in the vast, bewildering history of chicken's ascent in the quick-service kingdom. A kingdom, one might add, ruled by the benevolent, yet utterly inscrutable, hand of the Colonel, a hand that might, perhaps, have also punched those holes.

Suddenly, the relentless hum of the hypermarket shifted, deepened. A new, grating whine cut through the ambient music, growing louder, closer. Two Step's wattles flared slightly. Miloš paused, spatula hovering over a trough of suspiciously gray-looking hot dogs.

From around the corner of Aisle 4, "Premium Dairy Alternatives," a truly bizarre procession emerged. It was a parade float, if one could call it that, crafted from a standard, well-worn shipping pallet. It moved with a slow, grinding scrape across the linoleum, pulled by a beleaguered store associate named Kevin, whose perpetually slumped shoulders suggested a life spent solely pulling heavy things. Kevin wrestled a manual pallet jack, its hydraulic whine adding a discordant note to the supermarket's symphony.

On the pallet, arranged in a tableau of uncomfortable dignity, sat several life-sized, vaguely mannequin-like figures in period attire. These were, unmistakably, the Gordonsville "Waiter Carriers" – African American women, some with baskets on their laps, others holding out phantom fried chicken through imaginary train windows. They sat stiffly, their faces painted with a solemn, perhaps weary, expression. Among them, a figure assumed to be Bella Winston, hands clasped, a faint, almost translucent glow emanating from her, as if a spectral chicken drumstick were perpetually paying for her spectral home. And near them, a stark, uncomfortable contrast, a grotesque, grinning caricature with exaggerated features, clearly representing the historical "Coon Chicken Inn" mascot, perched precariously on a smaller box. It was a tableau

both reverent and deeply, profoundly disturbing, existing simultaneously in the realm of historical fact and the supermarket's waking nightmare.

Then, over the distorted loudspeaker system, normally reserved for urgent price checks or announcements about missing children, a voice blared forth from the service desk. It was Brenda, the evening manager, whose voice was typically a flat, metallic drone, but was now imbued with an unsettling, forced cheer.

"ATTENTION, SHOPPERS! ATTENTION, SHOPPERS! As part of our ongoing commitment to community enrichment and historical remembrance, your Super Value Mart is proud to present a LIVE HISTORICAL EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE! Moving through the store now, please give a warm welcome to our 'Poultry Pioneers' float!"

The float scraped closer. Two Step's inner monologue, usually a swirling vortex of philosophical inquiry, momentarily stalled, replaced by a raw, unadulterated grimace. The PA system crackled, and Brenda's voice returned, even louder, even more relentlessly chipper, as if she were trying to drown out the very history she was describing.

"On this float," Brenda's voice echoed, each word too distinct, too performative, "we honor the intrepid African-American women of Gordonsville, Virginia! In the late 1800s, these remarkable entrepreneurs, often formerly enslaved, revolutionized roadside dining! Did you know, folks, that by selling their delicious fried chicken, biscuits, and pies to hungry train passengers, they created an early form of 'fast food' and achieved impressive economic independence? For example, Bella Winston, a former waiter carrier, famously recounted in 1970 how her mother 'paid for this place with chicken legs.' That's right, folks! A true testament to their resilience and ingenuity! This was a rare degree of agency for African-Americans post-emancipation, a time of profound uncertainty! A real triumph of the human spirit! And a great way to sell chicken!"

Brenda paused, a loud, artificial chuckle vibrating through the speakers. The float, pulled by the suffering Kevin, scraped past. The static figures on it seemed to stare, their painted eyes vacant, yet accusatory. Two Step felt a cold shudder, a distinct chill passing through his wattles, colder than any freezer aisle. The grotesque "Coon Chicken Inn" mascot seemed to wink.

"Now," Brenda continued, her voice dipping slightly, as if attempting a note of gravitas that was utterly lost in the supermarket acoustics, "we also acknowledge the complexities of history. Presented here, for your educational consideration, is a representation of the 'Coon Chicken Inn,' a chain that emerged in 1925. This historical artifact, while regrettable in its use of racist caricatures, highlights the often contradictory paths to economic survival in a deeply inequitable society. For instance, former headwaiter Roy Hawkins recounted earning a lucrative $100 to $200 a night in tips at this establishment, at a time when bricklayers earned only $5 a day. A stark illustration of the challenges and compromises faced in that era! We learn from the past, folks! We grow! Now, back to our regularly scheduled programming!"

The PA system clicked off abruptly, leaving an echoing silence that seemed louder than any sound. Kevin, still pulling the pallet jack, steered the float slowly around the corner, disappearing into the vast, indifferent landscape of frozen desserts. Two Step and Miloš stood in the sudden quiet, the ghost of Brenda's chipper voice lingering in the air like a noxious, educational gas.

Finally, the hunger, a profound, almost spiritual yearning, stirred within his feathery breast. A yearning for a brief respite from the perforations, and from the parade of history. He rolled the scooter to the deli counter, a space suffused with the greasy perfume of hot food and the languid sighs of Erik Satie's "Gymnopédie No. 1" pulsing from the Supermarket Radio, a relentless, cyclical drone. Above, the floating heads continued their Latin litany, growing faintly louder, almost a hum, before ending with a collective, guttural "Bob," a final, unsettling benediction.

"Two wings," Two Step clucked, his voice a surprising baritone, resonant with the echoes of his past. "Two drumsticks. And don't skimp on the potato wedges. Macaroni and cheese, generous portion. And, if you have it, a side of existential dread. It complements the chicken rather nicely, particularly when contemplating the semiotics of pre-punched holes and historical re-enactments."

The deli worker, a pallid youth named Miloš with a permanent smudge of paprika on his cheek, scooped the items with the weary grace of a man who had seen too many existential poultry crises, and perhaps, too many perfectly circular perforations, and now, too many uncomfortable historical dioramas. Miloš, Two Step observed, possessed the verbal tics of the truly haunted: a constant, almost imperceptible twitch of his left eyebrow, and a tendency to hum forgotten jingles

from the 1980s, jingles that spoke of bright, consumerist futures, utterly devoid of holes and problematic historical narratives.

As Miloš handed him the tray, Two Step initiated a conversation that would unravel the very fabric of their understanding.

"Miloš, my friend," Two Step began, "tell me, have you ever stopped to consider the blood ratio of these creatures? The chickens, I mean. How much of their essence is lost in the process?"
Miloš blinked, spatula poised. "Blood ratio, mister? I just thought it was... you know, slaughter and packaging. Like, uh, efficiency."

Two Step leaned in, his eyes glinting.
"Ah, but that's where the poetry of numbers comes in, Miloš! The average meat hen, a creature of fleeting existence, carries about 8% of its body weight in blood."

Just then, the rotisserie chickens, now aligned perfectly with Two Step's gaze, chimed in unison, their voices a low, synchronized hum:
"Yes, 8%! A mere fraction, yet oh so vital. For a 4-pound broiler, that translates to roughly 145 mL or about 0.6 cups of blood."

The floating heads above, their Latin chant momentarily suspended, added in eerie harmony:
"Sanguis est vita, vita est sanguis. (Blood is life, life is blood.) Consider, mortals, the arithmetic of sacrifice."

Even the red linoleum on the floor seemed to stir, its voice a low, almost subsonic rumble:
"I've seen it all, friends. The trickles, the spills, the uncounted liters. They say for every chicken sold, a drop is left behind. A drop that aggregates, a sea that forms."
Miloš's face paled further, his paprika smudge standing out like a brand. "You mean... all those chickens, over the years...?"

Two Step nodded solemnly. "Precisely, Miloš! Now, let us extrapolate. In 2020 alone, the U.S. processed over **9.22 billion broiler chickens**. Each with its 'mere trickle' of life."

The rotisserie chickens rotated in silence, as if performing a grim calculation. Then, one by one, they whispered:
"9,220,000,000 chickens × 145 mL blood/chicken... that's... 1,336,900,000,000 mL... or **1.337 trillion liters of blood**."

The floating heads above murmured, "**Seventy-two point five billion liters**, to be exact, when adjusted for historical data."
The red linoleum vibrated, almost imperceptibly. "I've absorbed it, friends. Every drop. It's not just a color; it's a memory, a testament to the unseen."
Miloš stumbled back, his eyes wide. "I... I had no idea. It's like... an ocean beneath us."

Two Step placed a reassuring claw on Miloš's shoulder. "Indeed, my friend. The crimson sea beneath our feet. Every 'HOT & READY!' chicken, every neatly packaged cut, rests upon this silent, horrifying truth."

Intermission: The Verdant Vigil

Near the organic produce, the elderly pilferess reappeared, now freed from her custodial escort. She wandered, lost, her blouse still awkwardly bulging with pilfered eggs. A poetic fragment drifted through the air, as if whispered by the lettuce leaves themselves:

Oh, wanderer of the verdant aisle, thy spirit flies,
With eggs of rebellion, thou didst smile, beneath cold skies.
Now, freed from bonds, thy footsteps stray, a path unclear,
A verdant vigil, in a fluorescent day, dispelling fear.
Thy heart, aflutter like a captive bird, a captive plight,
Seeks solace in the green, unguarded word, with fading light.
The avocados, ripe and dark as fate, a deep despair,
Beckon thee to theft, an endless debate, a heavy care.
Yet, in thy eyes, a spark remains, a hidden truth,
A flame of defiance 'gainst the supermarket's chains, from early youth.

For in each egg, a story's told, of market's plight,
Of hunger, freedom, and a life grown old, in fading light.

The old woman vanished into the crowd, leaving behind a single, forgotten pickled egg on the floor, its vinegar-scented aura a faint rebuke to the sterility of the space.

The narrative resumed, Two Step finishing his meal in contemplative silence. The deli worker, now looking utterly bewildered yet strangely illuminated, nodded slowly, his gaze still fixed on some unseen horizon.

"Tired, Miloš?" Two Step asked, a glimmer in his eye.

Miloš hesitated. "I... I think I need a break, mister. Maybe I'm just tired. Or perhaps I've finally cracked under the weight of the supermarket's relentless optimism. Or maybe... maybe the holes do mean something."

"Precisely!" Two Step beamed, his wattles glowing with intellectual fervor. "The very act of consumption is an act of critical engagement! It is, in essence, an oral examination of the culinary arts! And we, the consumed, we offer ourselves for such scrutiny! Knowing full well we are already... designated."

He finished his meal, the last sips of 7-Up a final, effervescent punctuation. The deli worker, now looking utterly bewildered yet strangely illuminated, nodded slowly, his gaze still fixed on the dill spears, perhaps searching for his own perforations or wondering if he too would one day find himself on a pallet float.

Intermission: Moonlit Malfeasance

As night deepened, the supermarket's fluorescent glow cast an otherworldly light on the emptying aisles. The elderly pilferess, now a shadowy figure, crept back into view, her eyes aglow with a mix of mischief and despair. She reached the checkout lanes, where a lone cashier, bored and listless, mechanically scanned the dwindling stream of groceries.

A final, lyrical fragment captured the moment:

Moonbeams danced upon the checkout floor, a silent gleam,
As midnight thief and tedium conspired once more, a waking dream.
The eggs, now freed from blouse and secret place, a profit made,
Rolled softly, like confessions, onto the scanner's glass, a soul betrayed.
The cashier's eyes, half-lidded, void of spark, with weary gaze,
Registered each theft with mechanical dark, through hazy days.
The old woman smiled, a wry, defeated grin, a bitter jest,
As moonlight and fluorescents entwined within, put to the test.
In this cold waltz of commerce and decay, the price demands,
She paid for nothing, yet gave her life away, through shifting sands.
For in the supermarket's endless, sterile song, the grab for gold,
Even rebellion echoes, faint and wrong, a story told.

The old woman disappeared into the night, the cashier's register drawing a final, hollow beep.

The supermarket slumbered, its dreams infused with the distant hum of "Pierrot Lunaire", the rotisserie chickens turning silently, their shadows cast like dark benedictions on the red linoleum sea.

The night air, within the store, felt strangely crisp, cleansed of the supermarket's oppressive hum, yet carrying a faint, lingering aroma of roasted poultry, an aroma forever tainted by the memory of a sharp, metallic snap, and the blaring, well-intentioned, entirely unwelcome voice of Brenda.

The Crimson Sea Beneath Our Feet

A faint hum in the air, a disruption of the fluorescent calm. The red linoleum, a startling expanse.

Two Step: "Miloš, my dear fellow, observe the floor beneath us. This red, unyielding expanse. It is not merely a design choice, a splash of cheerful vinyl for the weary shopper." He gestured with a potato wedge, a small, starchy flag.

Miloš blinked, his left eyebrow twitching.

"The floor, mister? It's... it's just red. Standard issue for this kind of place. Durable, you know. Hides spills." He looked down, as if for the first time truly seeing the color. A faint tremor passed through his spatula hand.

Two Step: "Precisely! Hides spills, you say? Ah, the profound truth of the mundane! But what spills, Miloš? What crimson tides does it truly conceal?"
The rotisserie chickens, now aligned in perfect synchrony, murmured:
"We've seen the numbers, Miloš. The **72.5 billion liters of blood**. An ocean, hidden, yet palpable."
The floating heads whispered, "Iter... Fatum... Foramen... Fabula..." (Story.)
The red linoleum vibrated, its voice now a resonant bass: "I am the sum of all their endings, the silent witness to the great exchange: life for sustenance, freedom for convenience."
Miloš's face was ashen, the paprika smudge on his cheek standing out like a brand. His spatula clattered against the stainless steel counter, producing a sound far louder than it should have. "The red linoleum, mister... it's not just a color. It's... it's a sea. A vast, silent, horrifying sea. And we're just... standing on it."

Two Step: "Indeed, Miloš. The red linoleum is the palpable, unyielding truth beneath our feet. It is the solidified legacy of that immense, unseen sacrifice. Every 'HOT & READY!' chicken, every neatly packaged cut, every rotisserie bird spinning in its golden cage – it is all underpinned by this crimson truth."

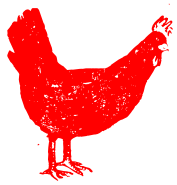
A lingering image of the red floor, then a rapid succession of seemingly unconnected details: the barcode scanner beeping rhythmically, a child's hand reaching for a bright candy bar, the subtle crack in a ceiling tile, the supermarket slumbering, its dreams infused with the distant hum of "Pierrot Lunaire", the rotisserie chickens turning silently, their shadows cast like dark benedictions on the red linoleum sea.

Epilogue: A Sense of Place, a Memory Renewed

As the supermarket settles into its somnolent state, the faint, disquieting hum of existence persists. The final sound that permeates the now-quiet space is the gentle, rising swell of **Sufjan Stevens' "Chicago."** Its melancholic yet hopeful melody offers a strange counterpoint to the supermarket's existential dread, particularly as a lyric drifts into the ether, resonating with the very core of Two Step's peculiar agency: **"All things go, all things go."**

In Proustian terms, this lyric acts as a madeleine for the entire narrative. The simple phrase, like the taste of a cookie dipped in tea, unlocks a flood of involuntary memories and profound insights. For Two Step, the "all things go" doesn't merely signify the passage of time or the transient nature of life, but the relentless, predetermined "going" of the consumed, the endless cycle of the rotisserie chickens, the "flow" of commodities through the supply chain. It calls to mind the "clack-clack-clack" of the processing facility and the mechanical "snap" of the tags, the pre-punched holes that signify a fate to which "all things go."

Yet, within this resignation, there's also a subtle, almost imperceptible hope for Two Step. Just as Proust's narrator finds redemption and artistic purpose in the recollection of lost time, Two Step, through his diligent observation and philosophical inquiry, attempts to find meaning in the very inevitability that the lyric expresses. By acknowledging that "all things go," he paradoxically asserts his own agency: to witness, to understand, and perhaps, to transcend the designated path. The quiet resignation of the song, combined with its underlying surge of journey and aspiration, perfectly encapsulates the supermarket's dream-like state, a place where profound truths and mundane realities intertwine, leaving behind a lingering sense of bittersweet contemplation, a memory both consumed and re-membered.



CNG
CTSNGG
GRJHALEN

The Catalogue of Essential Emptiness, or The Duck on the Wall: An Enquiry into the Circulation of Biological and Bibliographic Currencies in the Postlapsarian Age, with Notes on the Esoteric Significance of the Auto-Rickshaw as a Liminal Vehicle.

By Arthur Pakchoï

The phrase, rendered into the vernacular, hung over the delta lands like a persistent, humid fog: Village of one kidney. It was a designation born of necessity, a grim taxonomy applied to Baiguni, deep within the Kalai Upazila, where the soil yielded less than the flesh, where the exigencies of subsistence trumped the perceived indivisibility of the somatic self. It spoke of a quiet excision, a piece bartered across porous borders, a transaction lubricated by the insidious efficiencies of fraud and the yawning chasm between the desperate hunger of a few and the surging, almost abstract, demand for cellular repair elsewhere. A booming business, they called it. A circulation of vital fluidities, human and economic, obeying a perverse logic of its own.

He piloted the Compressed Natural Gas auto-rickshaw through the arterial snarl of Dhaka. The CNG. Not merely a conveyance, mind you, but the very engine of his being-in-the-world, its

insistent thrum a counterpoint to the city's chaotic symphony of horns and vendors' cries. Today, the destination was the Sufia Kamal National Public Library, a monumental edifice promising refuge from the sun's glare and the coarser realities of the street. His quarry: first editions. Not the weighty tomes of jurisprudence or the brittle folios of ancient verse, but something far more vital, more necessary to his peculiar equilibrium. Donald Duck comics. In Bengali. An obsession that felt, at times, more real than the pavement under his wheels.

Are we footnotes or headlines? What is the square root of orange peel? Everything tastes like disappointment.

The search was labyrinthine, a delving into the dusty catacombs of a national memory. The library, vast and echoing, felt less like a repository of knowledge and more like a geological layer cake of human endeavour, each shelf a stratum of forgotten arguments and discarded dreams. He traced the spines, fingers trailing over titles, the faint smell of mildew and aged paper filling his lungs. He sought the familiar, irascible silhouette, the feathered protagonist of a thousand slapstick misadventures.

The opposite of up is probably sideways. If a thing has a price, is it a thing? Blue is just tired green.

He parked the CNG with the casual faith born of routine. A brief absence. A quick foray into the stacks. The return. An empty patch of asphalt. The metal was gone. Vanished. Dissolved into the city's voracious anonymity as though it had never been. The familiar, comforting hum replaced by a ringing silence that felt like a physical blow. The ground seemed to tilt. His anchor, severed.

Why are shoes friends? Gravity is a suggestion, not a rule. Is this Tuesday?

Panic clawed, sharp and sudden. The vehicle was not just metal and rubber; it was income, sustenance, the means to propel himself forward. Without it, he was stranded, adrift in the relentless current of urban life. The calculation began, stark and brutal. The price of a new CNG. The impossible height of that sum. And the other option. The one whispered in the village, amplified by the city's desperate pulse.

A cloud looks down on us. Or does it? Maybe clouds are looking up at something else entirely. Like ducks?

The body, that fragile vessel, suddenly felt like a collection of spare parts. A visceral, horrifying realization. The kidney. The brokers, smooth-talking predators lurking in the shadows of clinics and tea stalls, materialised in his mind's eye. They knew the price of desperation. They knew the village's moniker. They offered a figure: 350,000 taka. A number that felt obscene and insufficient all at once. Less than half the true cost of his lost autonomy. The stark dialectic: body vs. machine. Organ vs. engine. Life vs. livelihood. And the scale tipped, grotesque and final. A piece excised for inadequate compensation. He joined the silent fraternity of the missing. He became, in essence, a part of the catalogue.

If you sell a piece of yourself, is the remainder still whole? Does a tree remember its leaves? What is the sound of one hand clapping a feather?

He did not leave the library. Where would he go? The stacks became his temporary dwelling, a sanctuary of sorts, though the irony was a bitter grit on his tongue. He, dispossessed of his physical vehicle, found refuge within the vast, static archive of human movement and thought. He slept on a narrow cot hidden amongst towering shelves, the air thick with the ghosts of authors and arguments long concluded. He continued his search, though the urgency had shifted. The duck now felt less like a delightful distraction and more like a symbol of something lost, something absurdly precious in a world that valued flesh in purely transactional terms.

He delved deeper. Into the restricted sections. Ancient texts. Fragile, hand-bound volumes in scripts that curled and flowed like forgotten rivers. Sanskrit. Pali. Old Bengali dialects preceding the tongue he spoke. He traced the intricate calligraphy, feeling the weight of history in his fingertips. What were they thinking, these scribes of centuries past? What were their anxieties? Their absurd quests? Did they, too, feel like fragments in a cosmic machine?

A shoe is just a foot in disguise. Maybe everything is a disguise. Especially courage. Or soup.

One evening, following a draught from a leaky ceiling pipe through a rarely accessed annex, he found himself facing a wall that felt different. Older. Plaster, rough and uneven. Not concrete.

Not brick. A deeper layer. And there, half-hidden behind a stack of governmental reports from the colonial era, was the inscription. Not drawn in charcoal or painted. Scratched deeply into the plaster itself. Deliberate.

It was unmistakable. The shape. The beak. The peak cap. Three feathers. Crude, yes, but undeniably the duck. On the wall. In the library. Buried beneath layers of official history. An anagogic flash. The low comic character juxtaposed with the high edifice of national learning and ancient wisdom. The body, the CNG, the library, the duck. A collision of elements seemingly disparate, yet here, inextricably linked by the simple, desperate act of a human hand seeking to mark existence, to find meaning, perhaps even a strange kind of power, in the most unexpected places.

He learned, haltingly, from the kindly old man who seemed to drift through the library's forgotten corners, a figure himself like an unbound manuscript – smelling of dust and ink and the quiet patience of centuries – that the wall was older than the current library building, a remnant of a structure from a previous age. A house? A temple? The old man just smiled, his eyes holding the depth of countless read pages.

It was the old man, too, who quietly pointed him towards the overgrown lot behind the police barracks. And there it sat, a hulking, derelict form amidst weeds and discarded tires. An abandoned CNG. A skeletal husk, its paint faded, its chrome pitted like a pockmarked moon. Decay made manifest. But its shape was right. Its essence, present. Structural authenticity.

He began the painstaking process of resurrection. Scouring scrap heaps. Bartering with weary mechanics. The greasy smell of old engines. The clatter of tools. The smooth weight of a salvaged crankshaft. Expressive materiality. He felt a connection to the machine, a perverse intimacy with its brokenness, mirroring his own. He became an assembler of damaged goods, piecing together a functional whole from discarded fragments.

Oh, the Bengali CNG! Not the sleek, impersonal boxes of the global north, but creatures of character, often dented, adorned with faded stickers, tassels swaying from the rearview mirror like defiant flags. Their engines, usually two-stroke, a persistent, buzzing heartbeat that vibrates up through the worn seat and into your very bones. The drivers, perched precariously, navigating

the impossible flow of traffic with a mix of daring improvisation and fatalistic acceptance. Each a self-contained unit of commerce and chaos, a bright yellow beetle scurrying through the urban jungle, vulnerable yet essential. They are the city's capillaries, carrying the lifeblood of trade and transport, weaving through the gridlock with a noisy, determined grace. To lose one was to lose a limb. To rebuild one was to reclaim a fragment of oneself.
And the texts. His search continued, not just for the duck on the wall, but for the printed duck, the graphic incantations that had first drawn him into this strange pilgrimage. He compiled a list, a meticulous, almost ritualistic catalogue of his quarry, drawing on memory, fragmented notes, and overheard whispers amongst fellow, equally eccentric, collectors.

A Provisional, Non-Exhaustive List of Sacred Donald Duck Textual Manifestations Observed and Sought Within the Great Library and Adjacent Purviews:

1. Hãsher Kândo (হাঁসের কাণ্ড) - (Duck's Antics) - Publishers Unknown, likely early 1960s. Fragments sighted.
2. Donald Ducker Oshomvob Kãj (ডোনাল্ড ডাকের অসম্ভব কাজ) - (Donald Duck's Impossible Tasks) - Ananda Publishers (Calcutta), Circa 1975. Rare. Binding worn.
3. Tinte Shishu, Ekti Hãsh (তিনটে শিশু, একটি হাঁস) - (Three Children, One Duck) - Text adapted from Italian source, publishers varies. Editions from late 1970s particularly prized.
4. Mickey O Donald (মিকি ও ডোনাল্ড) - (Mickey and Donald) - Compilation volumes, often featuring translations of Carl Barks stories. Editions by Deb Sahitya Kutir, 1980s. Condition varies wildly.
5. Patka Donald (পটকা ডোনাল্ড) - (Firecracker Donald - informal title) - Referencing particularly explosive storylines. Likely pirated or unofficial collections. Dates indeterminate, provenance obscure.
6. (Possibly related non-Bengali sources found in translation or original:) Il Saggio di Paperino (Italian), Pato Donald (Portuguese/Brazilian), various Danish/Dutch publications known to have influenced international editions, exact print dates for specific Bengali translations often unrecorded.
This list, like his rebuilt CNG, felt both complete and perpetually unfinished. A provisional map of a personal territory carved out of chaos.

He finished the CNG. It coughed to life with a ragged, triumphant roar. Not new, but resurrected. Dented, mismatched panels, a seat cover patched with tape. It was his. Reclaimed from the junkyard of existence. He drove it, tentatively at first, then with growing confidence, back into the city's maelstrom.

Is rust the memory of water? If you polish a stone, does it forget being rough? We are all just spare parts looking for an assembly manual.

He still visited the library. The search for the printed duck continued, less desperate now, more like a quiet ritual. And he would always pause by the wall. The duck inscription. A strange, silent echo of his journey. The village of one kidney. The lost CNG. The transaction of flesh. The resurrection of metal. The labyrinthine search for meaning. And the duck, etched into the ancient plaster, a timeless witness to the absurd, brutal, and persistently miraculous collision of life's disparate elements. It wasn't just a drawing. It was a revelation. A fragment of truth hammered into the physical world. The anagogic effect, realized not in scripture, but in plaster and a cartoon character. He had lost a kidney for a fraction of the price of a new CNG, rebuilt a broken one from scrap, and found a duck on a wall. The circulation continued. The catalogue expanded. And the hum of his resurrected auto-rickshaw joined the city's unending, complex song.

Lassie Buries a Few Bad Bones

By Milford Scott

A theater in Brattleboro, 1976:
Velvet seats, the sticky scent of old popcorn—
I am five,
my head barely above the seatback,
watching Lassie,
her fur refracted through a crust of dust and faded Technicolor,
lost and looping, always almost home
but not quite—
is this how nostalgia works?
A child hoping the screen will find its way out,
as if hope could be projected,
as if a dog could smell its way through
celluloid,
history,
the ache of years.

What if Lassie never comes home?
What if home is just a flicker,
a memory that collapses into static,
or worse, a rerun in a new genre?

Cut.
The montage ruptures—
there you are, Lassie,
your muzzle graying,
starring in direct-to-video shootouts,
your name a punchline
in a world of geezer teasers and digital ghosts:

Bruce Willis,
Liam Neeson,
Steven Seagal,
Chuck Norris,
Carrot Top—
(do clowns on cocaine dream of electric sheepdogs?)
You bite heads off drug lords,
ninjas,
clowns fired from cannons,
unlicensed real estate agents.
Who writes these scripts?
Who greenlights the absurd?

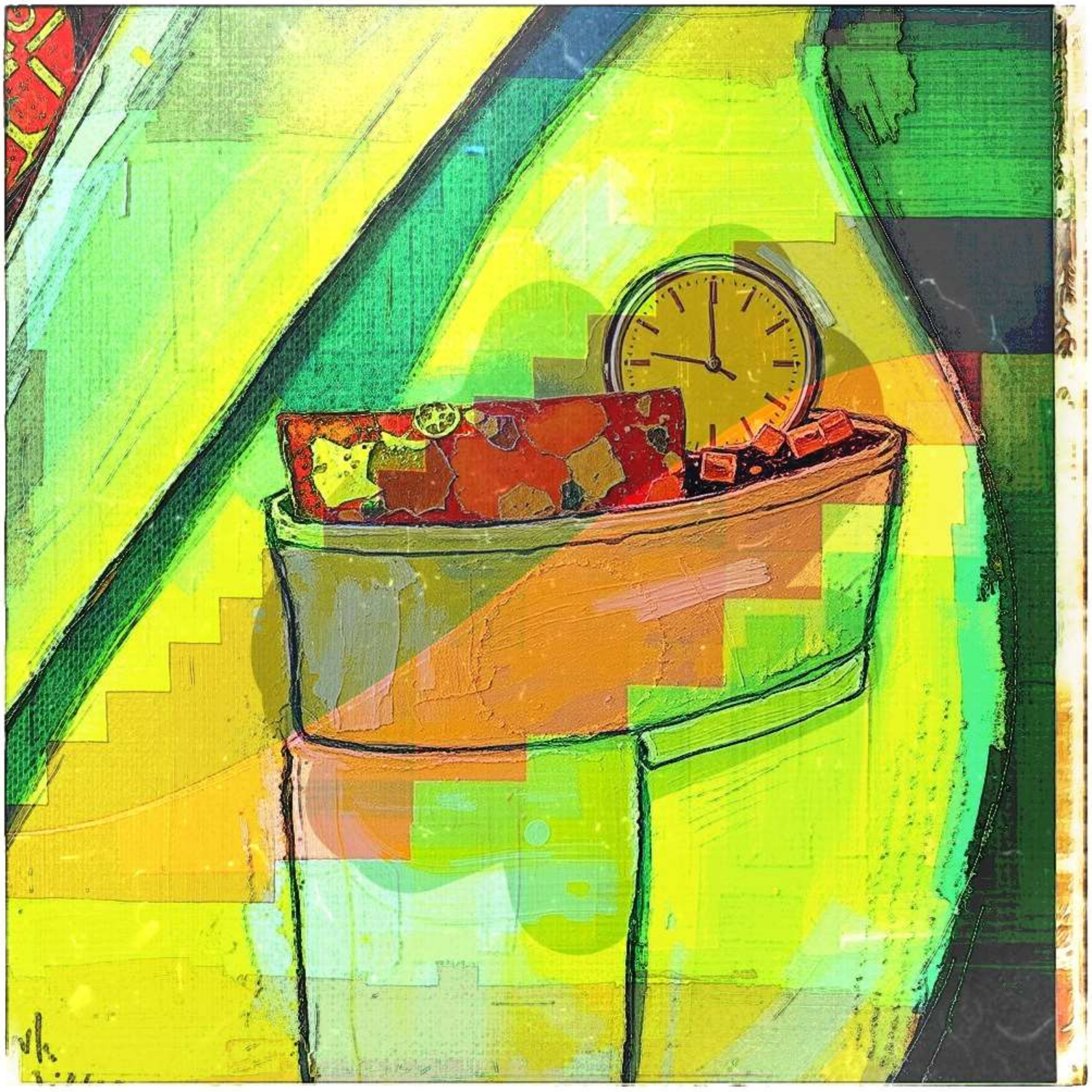
Could it be that every child star must one day gnaw
at the bones of their own myth?
A junkyard dog with a dark past,
rabid for revenge or relevance—
it's hard to tell.
Rumor:
They dub in your barks now,
use doubles and puppets for the stunts,
while you nap in a trailer,
spoon-fed Kibble,
your jaw slack with dreams of chasing nothing
across a blue screen.

Is this what happens to legends?
A career measured in twelve dollars and thirty-two cents—
Hungary, Turkey,
Portugal,
the United Arab Emirates—
receipts like gravestones,
foreign,

incomprehensible,
yet somehow more real for their strangeness.

Here, the voices echo:
Is it time to go home, Lassie?
Or is home the place you left on that screen
in Brattleboro,
where a five-year-old believed
you could always find your way,
no matter the dust,
no matter the years,
no matter how the world turned
absurd and violent
and heartbreakingly funny?

The credits roll.
The theater is empty.
The screen flickers,
waiting for someone to call your name,
one last time.



The Phase-Shifted Afternoon

By Noname Burrito

Babbo Stylus V, a man whose very ocular twitch bespoke a neurological lineage of inherited obsessions, wrestled the I-91 highway sign up the corkscrew helix of his third-floor stairs. Each step resonated with the familiar, bronchial wheeze of the radiators, a basso continuo to the symphonic groans of his ancestral burdens. The sign, a stoic arrow of steel, pointed with an almost religious fervor toward Hartford—a city unseen, a Platonic ideal beyond the concrete vista of his window. From this aerie, only the quotidian asphalt of the parking lot was visible, an asphalt inhabited daily, precisely at 3:17 PM, by Mrs. Gloria Welch, age 93, enthroned in her folding chair.

"The sign is very heavy today," Babbo declaimed into the ether, his left eye commencing its familiar, staccato semaphore of stress as he pirouetted the awkward metallic rectangle through his doorway, an almost dadaist performance of domesticity.

Gloria, meanwhile, looked up from her sylvan throne. Her fingers, gnarled yet precise, flayed an orange with the surgical exactitude once reserved for the dismantling of clandestine radio transmitters during a war whose echoes still reverberated in the hollows of her memory. "Heavy things usually are," she observed, her voice imbued with the temporal gravitas of one who had witnessed the world's ontological phase-shifts across nine decades. "Unless they are not heavy, in which case they are light." Her pronouncement, a syllogism of crystalline simplicity, hung in the air like a philosophical zephyr.

Babbo froze, the sign balanced precariously against his hip, a metallic counterpoint to his existential equipoise. Through the grimy casement of his apartment window, Gloria's white hair caught the languid afternoon light, transforming it into spun fiber optic cables, transmitting the raw data of her wisdom. Her statement, a diamond of distilled logic, resonated with the ghost of his grandfather, the clockmaker, a man who, no doubt, would have calibrated the very tick of truth.

"I have been carrying this sign for twenty-two years," he bellowed down, his voice adopting the measured cadences of a man born into the Sisyphean inheritance of declaiming to the void. "My friend films me. The footage is mostly useless, but that is precisely the point."

Gloria nodded sagely, as though men bearing highway signs were as commonplace as the urban flitting of sparrows. "During the war, we carried messages that pointed to places that no longer existed. The pointing was more important than the destination." She sectioned her orange with the dispassionate precision of a vivisectionist. "Would you like some orange? It is from Florida, which is still there, I believe."

Babbo's pupils, those inherited lenses of obsolete visual media, dilated almost imperceptibly in the amber light. Gloria's orange segments, each a miniature, glistening tableau, shimmered like tiny Super 8 film frames, capturing a fleeting moment of citrus perfection. "Orange segments resemble the frames of experimental cinema," he mused aloud, his fingers twitching with the ghost tremors of his ancestors' repetitive neurological compulsions. "My uncle attempted to film an orange once. The project was never completed."

"Completion is overrated," Gloria countered, extending a segment of sun-drenched fruit. "I have been incomplete for ninety-three years. It is quite liberating."

From his window, a vantage point of inherited detachment, Babbo observed Gloria's folding chair. Its placement, he noted, was aligned with the almost uncanny precision of a sundial, catching the afternoon sun's trajectory with a mathematical exactitude that resonated with his father's jazz improvisations—where every note, every silence, every swing, was a calculated event, a deliberate act of temporal choreography. "Your chair placement suggests an understanding of solar geometry," he opined, settling the sign against the windowsill, a totem of direction in a world bereft of it. "Or perhaps it is simply comfortable."

"Comfort is a form of geometry," Gloria concurred, her eyes tracking the parabolic flight of a pigeon, a feathered harbinger of routine, as it alighted on the asphaltic edge of the parking lot. "That pigeon visits every Tuesday. I call him Harold, though he has never confirmed this name."

Babbo's heart rate, a stoic ticker within his breast, maintained its unnervingly steady rhythm, even as his mind, a kaleidoscope of inherited esoterica, began to forge synaptic bridges between Gloria's aviary nomenclature and his own meticulous catalogue of twenty-seven broken tuning forks. "Harold is an excellent name for a pigeon," he declared, the formal precision of his clockmaker lineage asserting itself. "It suggests reliability. I have twenty-seven broken tuning forks, but I have not named any of them."

"Naming requires commitment," Gloria observed, taking a deliberate, almost ritualistic bite of orange. "I once named a cat Margaret. She lived for eighteen years, confirming that the name suited her. Margaret was very particular about her food bowl placement."

Through the window, a pane separating interior eccentricity from exterior banality, Babbo watched Gloria's methodical, almost liturgical consumption of her orange. Each segment was approached with the same fastidious attention his grandmother had bestowed upon her ledger entries. The afternoon light, a transient, liquid gold, began its inevitable shift, casting new, elongated shadows across the parking lot, and he realized, with a sudden, almost Proustian clarity, that this very conversation was itself a phase-shifted composition—repetitive yet evolving, a fugue of everyday absurdity, never quite resolving, always deferring.

"I believe," Babbo stated, his voice resonating with the formal precision of inherited clockmaker speech, "that we are engaged in a form of temporal improvisation. Your three-seventeen chair placement, my twenty-two years of sign carrying, Harold's Tuesday visits—these are not random occurrences but movements in a larger composition."

Gloria looked up, her eyes, reservoirs of accumulated experience, having witnessed radio waves transmute into television, television into digital, digital into something yet to be named. "Young man," she said, her address carrying the weight of ninety-three years, rendering all others as mere novitiates, "everything is a composition. The trick is learning to hear the music."

Above them, a cloud, a transient shroud, passed over the sun, momentarily plunging the parking lot into a chiaroscuro of shadow. Harold the pigeon, a feathered avatar of Tuesday, took flight, his wings beating a rhythm that seemed to synchronize with the groaning, bronchitic radiators. The I-91 sign, an immutable arrow, continued its unwavering指向 toward Hartford, a destination

both concrete and symbolic. In that precise, phase-shifted moment, two individuals, separated by six decades and three floors of 19th-century architecture, discovered that the very space between certainty and absurdity was the precise locus where understanding, like a rare and fragile flower, bloomed.

"Tomorrow," Gloria announced, meticulously folding her orange peels into a neat, almost ceremonial pile, "I will bring extra orange segments."

"Tomorrow," Babbo replied, his left eye, miraculously, no longer a frantic semaphore of stress, "I will carry the sign down to the parking lot."

And in that shared beat of temporal improvisation, both knew that tomorrow would be exactly like today, yet profoundly different—a phase-shifted variation on the same eternal theme of humanity's Sisyphean quest to make sense of its inheritance of time, space, and the peculiar, undeniable weight of things that point nowhere in particular.

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